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WHAT TODAY'S HOMEMAKERS THINK ABOUT CHICKEN

The research I've been asked to tell you about today focuses on the "whys" behind the statistics the United States Department of Agriculture publishes. It's concerned with preferences--the opinions and attitudes of the consumers of farm products.

Recently the Department conducted a study of consumers' reactions to poultry. The survey provided up-to-date information on some of the factors influencing demand, and gave consumers an opportunity to express their opinions about poultry products.

The people in the Special Surveys Branch of the Statistical Reporting Service who conduct attitude studies are specialists in collecting information--the kind of information that gets at the reasons behind observed events. I know quite a bit about those people and how they conduct research projects: At the time the poultry study was undertaken, I was in charge of that group.

Let me tell you how we got this project underway. First came a review of our earlier study on poultry--a survey conducted

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Remarks by Trienah Meyers, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, at the National Broiler Council Seminar for Magazine Food Editors, New York, New York, October 26, 1965, 11:15 a.m. (EDT).

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in 1956.* Then we talked with commodity specialists in the Department as well as representatives of the industry--farmers, packers, processors, and retailers.

A few of the many topics discussed were: Is chicken eaten equally often by high income and low income families? Are homemakers concerned about the possibility of the family's developing "chicken fatigue" if it is served too frequently? Are more recipes needed to provide menu variety? Why are so many consumers unwilling to buy frozen chicken and yet willing to take fresh chicken home and freeze it themselves?

We soon realized that one study couldn't possibly prove or disprove all the hypotheses suggested, or answer all of the questions raised about consumers' opinions of poultry. We decided to gather as much data as we could within an interview lasting about 45 minutes--a reasonable length of time from a respondent's point of view.

Because of the size of this study, we contracted it out to a private market research firm--one with which we could work closely every step of the way. The firm chosen was the same one which had conducted the previous study.

The main survey was preceded by an intensive small-scale study designed to identify psychological, social, and other factors related to the purchase and use of poultry products.

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* "Consumers Preferences, Usages, and Buying Practices for Poultry and Poultry Products"

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At the completion of the exploratory phase, a questionnaire was tested in cities, small towns, and rural areas in both the North and the South. This was done to be sure we had questions which different kinds of people in different parts of the U. S. would understand.

In the summer of 1964 we conducted personal interviews with over 2,600 homemakers--a scientifically selected probability sample of homemakers scattered from coast to coast in cities of all sizes and in open farm areas.

A preliminary report of some of the findings of this study has already been published and is available today for those of you who would like a copy.* We are now preparing a final report for publication next year. Though I will not go into great detail today, the final report will show much of the data by region, community size, family income, family size, and homemakers' age and education. And it will contain some information on turkeys as well as additional information on broilers.

I'm sure you realize that in interpreting the results of this study, allowance must be made for differences that might result from interviewing a sample instead of all homemakers. The data are also subject to errors of response. For example, when a homemaker says she uses a product a certain number of times

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* "Homemakers' Opinions and Preferences for Broiler-Fryers and Turkeys" - A Preliminary Report

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during a week or a year, she is describing what she considers to be her general practice.

Right now I'll try to hit the highlights of this study which we thought might be of some interest to this group.

Judging by the testimony of homemakers about the use of chicken, it is a national meal. Ninety-seven percent of our respondents reported using chicken in the preceding year, an increase of 4 percentage points since the 1956 study. Four regions were represented in our sample--Northeast, North Central, South, and West. The Northeast section showed the greatest increase, a total of 7 percentage points.

We know that almost everyone eats chicken; the question is, how often?

We found that nearly two-thirds of the families had eaten chicken at least once a week during the preceding year, as opposed to 50 percent in 1956. The frequency of serving broiler-fryers has increased in all subgroups of the population since the earlier study.

Respondents were also asked how often they had served broiler-fryers during the week just before the interview. The percentage of homemakers who had served chicken two or more times in the past week increased from about 2 in 10 in 1956 to 3 in 10 in 1964. It is apparent that not only are more homemakers serving chicken--they are serving it more frequently.

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But what about those homemakers who serve chicken infrequently? Homemakers who indicated they served chicken less than once a week were asked: "How come you don't serve broilers or fryers more often?" The reasons cited most frequently were a general dislike of chicken by certain family members or a feeling on the part of the homemaker that if she served chicken more frequently her family would tire of it. Relatively few homemakers mentioned such reasons as price, diet or specific characteristics of chicken.

The 4 homemakers in 10 who were aware of using chicken more frequently compared to four or five years ago, were asked what caused the increase. By far the biggest reason was price. Nearly half mentioned that chicken was more economical than it was four or five years earlier. In contrast, only about 3 in 10 of the homemakers responding to a similar question in the 1956 survey said that broilers and fryers were more economical than they had been four or five years before that.

Another reason homemakers now serve broilers and fryers more frequently is the marked trend toward weekday use. In 1964 chicken was served by homemakers more on weekdays than on Sundays. In 1956 the opposite was true.

And outdoor cooking may have stimulated the use of broiler-fryers. About 1 out of 3 homemakers said they had cooked chicken outdoors during the preceding year, compared to only 1 out of 10 homemakers in 1956. Outdoor cooking has increased significantly

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in all regions and among all subgroups of the population, with the largest gains among younger homemakers, homemakers in the upper income and educational groups, and among families of three or more.

Along with the trend toward cooking broiler-fryers outdoors, there is an increase in the proportion of homemakers who use chicken in ways other than frying. Although frying continues to be the most common method of preparation, the proportion of homemakers frying chicken (87 percent) has declined 7 percentage points since 1956. Use of some other methods of preparing chicken has increased considerably. For example, the proportion of homemakers reporting that they had stewed or boiled broiler-fryers went from 11 to 47 percent; barbecued went from 17 to 47 percent. Some of the differences in results between the earlier study and the current one might be due to a change in the questioning technique, but we believe the effect of the change is minor. Our interpretation is that there has been a real trend toward barbecuing, baking, and other methods of cooking chicken.

Despite these changes, many homemakers are not quick to try new recipes. Only 1 in 4 reported trying a new recipe within the year. The use of new methods of preparing chicken seems to be directly related to homemakers' socio-economic levels. As these levels increased, so did the likelihood of trying new ways of cooking chicken.

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Homemakers were asked which method of preparation they used most often in the winter and which they used most often in the summer. The frequency with which homemakers fry or broil chicken does not vary a great deal between the two seasons. However, baking or roasting chicken and stewing or boiling chicken seem confined mostly to winter months, while barbecuing chicken is almost exclusively a summer activity.

Let's turn now from the uses of chicken to purchasing practices and preferences. When respondents were asked which forms of chicken they had purchased most often within the past 12 months, about half reported they usually bought broiler-fryers as whole birds. Another 20 percent reported they most frequently bought the whole bird, but they preferred to purchase it cut into pieces. About the same proportion said they usually purchased legs, thighs, or breasts. Relatively few women reported frequent purchase of wings or backs or the whole bird split in two.

When women who tended to buy the whole bird were asked why they did so, 43 percent answered that it was more economical. Other reasons included liking all the parts and preferring to cut up the bird themselves. Women who usually purchased the whole chicken already cut up gave as principal reasons: It saves time, they dislike cutting it themselves, the family likes all the parts. By far the most frequent reason given by women who tended to purchase certain parts of the bird was that the family preferred that part. Among those who buy parts, about

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6 out of 10 said that the number of parts in the package was more important to them than the total weight when they are shopping for chicken.

But whatever women buy--whole bird or parts--they are inclined to feel that the price per pound is more important than total price. Forty-five percent favored price per pound, as opposed to 36 percent who favored total price.

Let's turn now to some criteria that homemakers consider in selecting chicken. One of the questions read: "Here is a list of things some people look for to be sure they get good chicken. Which of these do you look for when selecting a broiler or fryer?" Homemakers said they were primarily interested in getting chicken that is: well-cleaned, without bruises or discoloration, the right size, inspected by the government, plump and with no pinfeathers.

No matter how they buy their chicken, many women buy more of it when the price goes down. Half the respondents said they buy more chicken than they otherwise would when prices are lower than usual. But much of the larger quantity goes into the freezer for future use. As might be expected, stocking up on chicken when it's on sale was more prevalent among the one-third of the homemakers who had a separate freezer unit.

On the other hand, commercially frozen chicken does not seem to be a going concern from the consumer's point of view. Only

3 women in 10 said they had purchased frozen chicken during the preceding year and almost half had never bought a frozen chicken. Many women seem to fear the chicken may have been frozen too long.

The consensus among homemakers is that broiler-fryers are better today than they were 8 or 10 years ago. Fifty-seven percent of the homemakers gave reasons why they think broiler-fryers are better now. In contrast only 24 percent gave reasons why broiler-fryers are not as good as they used to be.

During the planning stages of the study, as I mentioned earlier, some of the industry advisors expressed concern about "chicken fatigue." They suspected that many women do not serve chicken as frequently as they might for fear their families would tire of it. To explore this possibility, homemakers were asked how often they thought they could serve each of six different meat items--once, twice, or three times a week? The items were beef, chicken, pork, lamb, turkey, and frankfurters.

If a homemaker thought she could serve an item three times a week, she was also counted in the "twice a week" and "once a week" categories. In each of the three frequency-of-serving groups, chicken scored second to beef and well above pork, frankfurters, turkey, and lamb.

Most homemakers appear to be serving chicken at a rate well below what they consider to be the maximum. Among women who

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were actually serving broiler-fryers about once a week (40 percent of the users), 7 out of 10 said they thought they could serve chicken at least twice a week without the family's getting tired of it. Among women who were serving broiler-fryers two or three times a month (23 percent of the users), almost 9 out of 10 thought they could serve chicken at least once a week before their family would tire of it and about half reported they could serve it at least twice a week.

There is, however, a wide gap between tolerance and preference. Later in the questionnaire the respondents were asked whether individual family members, including themselves, "would like to have broiler-fryers served more often, less often, or about the same as now." A majority of family members in each of the age groups were reported by homemakers as preferring to have chicken served at the current rate. However, many of the women believed their children--especially those under 13--would like to have chicken served more often. But they themselves, as well as the men in the family, would rather not have chicken more frequently.

The exploratory interviews conducted during the planning stages provided an opportunity to elaborate on this point. Any initial resistance the homemaker may feel to more frequent serving of poultry tends to dissipate when she is encouraged to think about ways of putting variety into her chicken dishes or serving chicken at lunchtime as well as for the evening meal.

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So far we've been talking about some of the day-by-day aspects of homemakers' opinions of chicken. But what about its overall image? Respondents were asked to indicate their reactions to broiler-fryers by selecting from a list of descriptive statements the ones that fitted their impressions. Let me stress one note of caution about this procedure before discussing the results: Failure to select a particular item does not necessarily mean that the respondent believes the opposite or that she believes the statement is not true--it means only that that particular phrase is not prominent in her mental image of the product.

The strongest impressions homemakers have of broiler-fryers are related to convenience, versatility, economy and flavor. The seven phrases that respondents selected most often to describe their image of broiler-fryers were:

1) "Easy to prepare"
2) "Makes a good Sunday meal"
3) "Less expensive per serving than other meats"
4) "It is very tasty"
5) "Makes a good weekday meal"
6) "Good for serving to guests"
7) "Can be served many ways"

Each of these statements was selected by roughly two-thirds of the respondents (59-69 percent). Incidentally, an unfavorable alternative to "easy to prepare" which was included in the list

was rarely selected: "Takes a long time to prepare" came up in only 3 percent of the interviews.

In describing their impressions of broiler-fryers, about half of the homemakers picked "It is easy to buy just the amount you need," and "It smells good while it is cooking." On the negative side we find that homemakers do not have very strong or favorable impressions of broiler-fryers with respect to the following statements:

1) "Good for festive occasions"
2) "Good to order when eating out"
3) "Good for sandwiches"

Each of these was chosen by only about one-third of the homemakers.

Homemakers also indicate relatively little knowledge of the nutritional value of broiler-fryers or what effect freezing has on them. "High in protein" was chosen by only 25 percent; "low in calories" was chosen by 20 percent. Those who picked a statement about freezing were divided in their opinion: About 20 percent selected "quick freezing preserves the quality" while about 15 percent selected "freezing takes away from the flavor."

I would like to end this discussion with a few comments concerning the use of convenience poultry products. Two-thirds of the homemakers said that they had bought some of the convenience items we asked about within the 12 months preceding the survey.

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Frozen chicken pot pies lead the list of convenience items bought. They were followed by frozen turkey pot pies, frozen chicken dinners, frozen turkey dinners, and barbecued chicken. Upon looking at the most popular items, frozen pies and dinners, we noticed the proportion of homemakers reporting the use of frozen chicken and turkey dinners has increased markedly since 1956. The proportion reporting the use of frozen chicken and turkey pies is at about the same level as in 1956. For instance, in 1956, 10 percent had served frozen chicken dinners, while in 1964, the percentage was 28. On the other hand, about 43 percent of the respondents in both 1956 and 1964 said that they served frozen chicken pies.

Let's take one last look at convenience items in terms of the various group classifications of our respondents. In general, convenience poultry items were purchased most frequently by homemakers in the upper income and educational levels, by those with three or more family members, and by those under 30 years of age. Also, convenience items were bought by more homemakers in the West than by those in other areas.

I hope that these advance highlights from our study have added to your knowledge of how the housewife views chicken. We have not had the opportunity yet to evaluate all of the findings in the context of data from other sources. We may find relationships which are not apparent to us at this time. And, since my remarks today are being released before final review

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and analysis of the data, there is the possibility of minor changes in the figures being discussed.

And now I'd like to get in a brief commercial for the farmer. As you probably know, part of the food industry is currently celebrating the fact that food is a bargain. And there is no question that chicken is a bargain food. Today broiler-fryers cost the consumer about 15 cents a pound less than they did 10 years ago. With the aid of the great variety of tempting recipes presented in your publications, chicken can also be one of the most versatile and interesting foods we have.